

STEINAR SUNDE

Guide to Anger Management for Parents



Parents who want to work with themselves to improve the day-to-day lives of their children deserve respect. This guide presents a cognitive model of anger management. The model is illustrated by means of a counselling session with “Elin”. The guide has been created to assist parents in maintaining a structure and a focus in the effort to manage anger.

Why do we get angry?

Anger is a normal feeling that we all have. The question, therefore, is not whether we are angry, but what it is that creates that anger and whether we feel we are in control of it. Anger can be a necessary marking of limits for both adults and children. Children need secure adults who set predictable boundaries and limits. The anger we are focusing on in this guide, is the anger that is unpredictable for the child. It is a kind of anger that the child is unable to understand and comprehend. Parents themselves are surprised at the force and unpredictability of their own anger. Anger often arises when the parent or carer feels stuck, helpless or powerless in a situation with the child. Anger then provides a way of breaking out of the situation and escaping from the discomfort and pain (Isdal 2000). Parents want the best for their children, and want to be good parents. But despite this, about 20 per cent of parents find that they frighten their children through anger or violent behaviour, and are worried about how this will affect their children. As long as parents do not know how to get help to manage their anger, many will try to play down what happens and talk about it as little as possible.

The ABC model

Anger management for parents is based on the classic cognitive therapy model in which thoughts, emotions and behaviour are all connected. The model takes as its point of departure the fact that we all have an inner conversation going with ourselves. We interpret situations we find ourselves in all the time. These interpretations are marked by negative automatic thoughts that we are often barely aware of: thoughts like, “I’m stupid, no-one listens to me, she doesn’t care about me,” etc. In cognitive therapy the focus is on working with these negative automatic thoughts and interpretations and showing how a change in these thoughts can lead to a change in emotions. The aim is to become aware of the kind of thoughts that prevent or assist anger management. The ABC model is widely used in cognitive therapy to help people work systematically to change negative automatic thoughts. “A” stands for situation, “B” stands for thoughts about or interpretation of the situation, and “C” stands for emotions and physical response. The ABC model is a way of illustrating the relationship between the situation, thoughts and emotions. Parents use the model to train their ability to be aware of negative automatic thoughts about themselves (B) so that they can be mindful of them.

The example that follows is that of a genuine initial counselling session with “Elin”. By reproducing the conversation, I will demonstrate how the ABC model can be used to help Elin to start taking control of her anger. Breaking out of negative thought patterns does not happen all by itself. Parents will need

to train over a period of time in situations with the child. The session with Elin concludes with specific suggestions for how she can prepare practice situations with the child in between counselling sessions.

The situation

Elin asks her five-year-old son Ole to turn off his computer game and go with her to the bathroom to brush his teeth before bedtime. When he does not listen to her for the third time she asks him to come, she gets angry, grabs Ole hard by the arm and drags him into the bathroom. Ole yells and Elin holds him fast while she brushes his teeth. Elin drags the crying Ole into the bedroom, puts him to bed and says that tonight there'll be no bedtime story since he has been so impossible. Elin leaves the bedroom, feels her heart beating hard and most of all feels she wants to cry. Why is there often so much conflict around bedtimes, and did the neighbours hear anything tonight?

The initial session

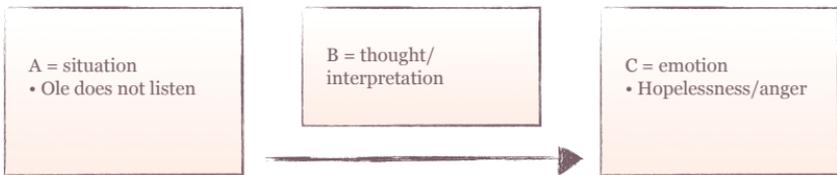
Elin comes to the family counselling centre and says that she needs help with her son who won't go to bed at night. The therapist (T) asks Elin whether she can describe a difficult situation that she remembers well. Elin says that as recently as the previous evening there had been a situation when Ole did not listen when she asked him to go to the bathroom. When he fails to listen to her she gets angry and takes him by force into the bathroom. Afterwards she feels like a bad mother. Elin says that when Ole does not listen, it is as though she goes into a tunnel that she does not get out of until Ole has gone to bed.

T asks whether she has noticed any change in Ole's behaviour following difficult bedtime situations? Elin says that she contacted the family counselling centre because Ole has now started going to his father instead of to her, and that Ole gets frightened when she raises her voice. Elin says that it is a very upsetting feeling for her that her son is afraid of her.

Mapping negative automatic thoughts

Elin says that she moves straight from a situation to an emotion – straight from A to C. She says that she does not have access to her thoughts and interpretations (B) until Ole is in bed. In the sessions with Elin, the initial focus is on helping her to see how her thoughts and interpretations (B) determine which emotions (C) are activated in her. “White stick” is an exercise that can be useful for practising how to differentiate between thoughts and emotions, while at the same time making one aware of how thoughts and interpretations (B) affect emotions (C).

Figur 1



“White stick” exercise

T asks Elin whether it is OK that they do an exercise? T says to Elin: Imagine that you are standing in a queue and someone comes from behind you and kicks you hard in the calf. Before you turn round and see who is standing behind you, what thoughts do you have about yourself? What emotions are activated? What is your body’s physical response? What do you want to do?

Elin replies that her thought is “who’s this idiot who’s kicking me in the leg?” Her emotion is that she gets angry and a little afraid. Her heart starts beating fast. Elin says that she wants most of all to turn round and kick back.

T then describes a new scene. When Elin turns round, she sees a blind man with a white stick. T asks her the same four questions again. Elin responds that her thought is now “poor man, he’s blind, he didn’t do it deliberately”. Her emotions change from anger to feeling sorry for the man. Her heartbeat slows and her breathing returns to normal in the course of a few seconds.

Elin says she wants to help the man, to ask where he is going, and perhaps show him the way.

T asks Elin what it is that has made her emotions and her physical response change so quickly? Elin says that “when my thought is that he has not done it deliberately but by accident, it causes quite different emotions in me in just a few seconds”.

After this exercise, T asks Elin to tell him about the bedtime situation once more – this time in a bit more detail before she got angry. Elin is asked to describe their home. Where was Ole sitting? Where did Elin come from when she approached Ole the first time?

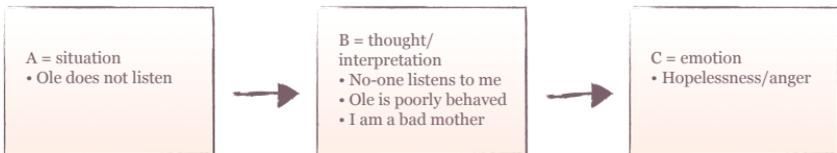
T asks Elin to describe what thoughts she is having about herself as she walks across the living room floor to ask Ole to turn off his computer game and go with her to the bathroom? Elin says that she is dreading the bedtime situation and thinks to herself that she hopes it will be OK this evening. T asks Elin what she is thinking about herself when she walks from the kitchen and across the living room floor to ask Ole for the second time to turn off his computer game and go with her to the bathroom? Elin says that she is thinking that Ole is poorly behaved and that no-one, not even her own child, can be bothered to listen to what she says.

T asks what sort of emotions these thoughts make her have? Elin says that she has a feeling of hopelessness and anger, that she can feel her heart beating fast and her head is boiling. T asks what thoughts Elin has about herself when she walks from the kitchen and across the living room floor the third time, to ask Ole to turn off the computer game and go with her to the bathroom? Elin says that she thinks that she is an incapable mother and that she is not respected. T asks what emotions these thoughts get going in her? Elin says that she can feel the rage coming and that she loses control of herself, because it is important for her to be a good mother and to be respected. Elin says that she has memories of a good childhood with kind parents and that she cannot understand why she loses control. She is ashamed of the way she reacts to Ole. The only explanation she

can think of for her anger is that it was important to be good and clever and to achieve when she was little. Elin says that she thinks of herself as a bad mother when she is unable to achieve by bringing up an “obedient” boy.

Elin has changed the experience she had of going direct from situation (A) to emotion (C), to being aware that she has several thoughts and interpretations (B) that affect her emotions (C).

Figur 2



Mapping alternative thoughts

If Elin’s negative automatic thoughts are not challenged, she may accept them as true. Negative automatic thoughts are often lies about ourselves that arise when we least need them. Rating negative automatic thoughts on a scale, normalisation of thoughts and mapping of alternative thoughts are ways of challenging negative automatic thoughts.

T asks Elin whether she believes that the thoughts that she is a bad mother, and that no-one respects her, are true? Elin says that she knows that she does a lot of things well 90 per cent of the time she is with Ole, but that the bedtime situations are harming their relationship. Elin goes on to say that she knows that she commands respect at work and that her partner respects her, but when Ole doesn’t listen it is as though the bad, painful emotion validates the negative thoughts she gets about herself.

Rating on a scale from 1 to 10

On a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 is a good mother and 10 is a bad mother, T asks Elin where she would place herself? Elin says that while she is sitting in the therapist’s office she would place herself as a 3, but in the situation when she gets angry with Ole it feels like a 9. On a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 is being respected

and 10 is not being respected, T asks Elin where she would place herself? Elin says that in her day-to-day situation at work and when she is with her partner, she would place herself as a 2, but in the situation when she gets angry with Ole it feels like an 8. Elin feels she has a realistic self-image most of the time, and yet negative automatic thoughts manage to trigger strong emotions in the bedtime situations with Ole.

Normalisation of thoughts

Are Elin and Ole in an unusual situation, or do other parents experience something of the same? T asks Elin whether she has heard of any other parents who have difficulties in getting five-year-old boys to bed at night, or whether she thinks that this is a situation that only she and Ole experience? Elin says that most parents of five-year-olds whom she knows say that bedtimes can be difficult. Elin says that she thinks that Ole does not appear to be more difficult than the other boys in the kindergarten.

Alternative thoughts

T asks Elin whether there are any other thoughts she could have about herself and Ole, when she is about to ask him for the second time to go to the bathroom, which would be equally true or more true than the thoughts she had yesterday? Elin says that she could think to herself that for 90 per cent of the time she is a good mother and that most people respect her. Elin says that she could think that Ole is only 5 years old and that it is normal for five-year-olds not to listen. Elin says that she could think that Ole is concentrating so much on the game that he actually doesn't hear what she is saying, and that it is not about him not showing her respect. T asks Elin about what would happen with her emotions if she were to think those things? Elin says that she would then be able to walk calmly over to Ole, bend down, speak calmly to him, finish off the game together and, for example, have a race to see who could get to the bathroom first. Elin says that she can see that if she could manage to interpret Ole's lack of response as the behaviour of a typical five-year-old,

and not as criticism of herself as a mother, she would be able to handle the situation in a completely different way. Through the conversation, Elin has become aware that her thoughts and her interpretation of the situation (B), have a significant bearing on which emotions are activated (C). Elin says that she can see that by practising to recognise and challenge negative thoughts about herself (B), she can take control of which emotions are activated (C).

T asks Elin to award some white sticks to Ole. What could the white sticks be called? Elin says that she probably thinks many times to herself that Ole is poorly behaved and is rejecting her when he does not answer and that he is thus doing something “against her”. Elin says that a white stick could be that Ole is only five years old and is in his own world of thoughts. He is not rejecting me deliberately to be nasty or hurtful to me. He is just very concentrated on what he is doing and a bit “blinkered” about what is going on around him. Elin sums up by saying that a white stick could be “Ole is only five years old”. Another white stick could be “Ole is in his own thought bubble”.

Using rating scales, normalisation of thoughts and mapping of alternative thoughts will help Elin to challenge the negative automatic thoughts and identify alternative, truer thoughts about herself.

Figur 3

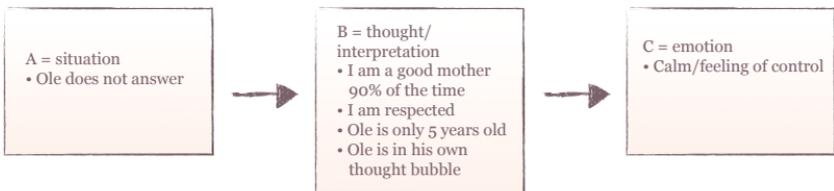


Fig. 3 on the worksheet, which Elin filled in, is an example of how to prepare for a practice situation with Ole. Elin changed (A) from “Ole does not listen” to a more neutral interpretation “Ole does not answer”. Under (B), Elin gives some “white sticks” to Ole and identifies alternative, truer thoughts about herself.

Preparation for homework

T asks how it would help Elin in a bedtime situation with Ole if she were to manage to give Ole one or more of these white

sticks? Elin says she thinks it would be extremely helpful, to prevent her from feeling under attack both in terms of her self-respect and as a mother. T asks what it would take for Elin to be able to use, for example, a “white stick” as a tool for herself in the next bedtime situation? Elin says that she can see she will need to practise and maintain her focus over many evenings. T asks Elin to imagine that she is walking across the living room floor for the second time, and asking Ole to turn off his computer game and go with her to the bathroom. What thoughts will she have about Ole and herself then? Elin says that she will maintain her focus on the thought that she is a good mother 90 per cent of the time. She will give Ole a “white stick” by thinking that he is only five years old; that he is in his own thought bubble and is not doing anything to provoke her. Elin says that she is excited to see how this focus will help and she is looking forward to getting home to practise. Elin says she is highly motivated to maintain the focus because it is very painful for her to see that Ole is afraid of her.

Summary

The ABC model shows that thoughts and interpretations come before emotions and affect emotions. Anger is a way of escaping from the discomfort caused by the feeling of being stuck and helpless in the situation with the child. Being aware of how the physical activation of emotions in the body can change in just a couple of seconds when one no longer feels under attack enables one to choose solutions other than anger. Not feeling that one is under attack is key to being able to think alternative thoughts in the situation which stop one from going into the “tunnel” where anger validates negative automatic thoughts about oneself. Recognising and challenging negative automatic thoughts is the starting point for creating exercises to do at home in which Elin practises anger management in between sessions.

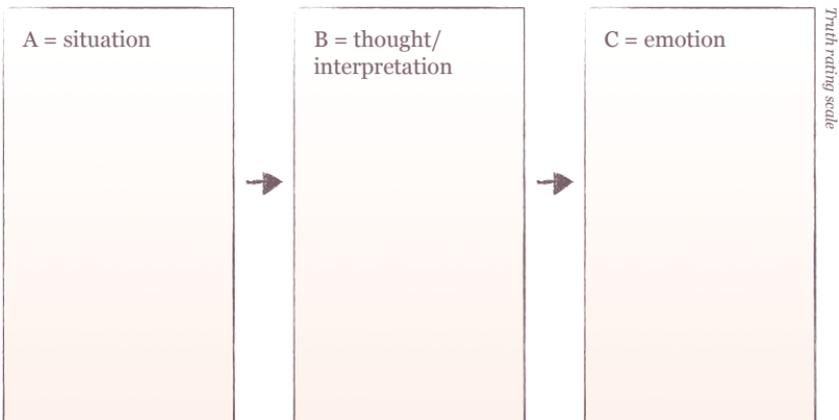
Homework

1. When you recognise a negative automatic thought (B), stop and give yourself a few seconds to be aware of what is happening.
2. Recognising a negative automatic thought (B) prevents you from going directly from situation (A) to emotion (C).
3. Ask yourself whether the negative automatic thought is true? Identify and bring up a “white stick” for the child, and an alternative, truer thought about yourself, to experience what effect they have on the feelings and emotions in the situation and how to manage them.

From powerlessness to mastery

Breaking out of a negative pattern of thinking does not happen by itself. It is necessary to practise over time in situations with the child. Filling in an ABC worksheet from practice situations with the child enables one to help oneself to manage anger. A successful practical exercise gives a feeling of mastering the situation with the child, instead of the feeling of powerlessness that often precedes anger and violent behaviour.

ABC worksheet



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This guide to anger management, littsint.no, e-book and anger management app have been developed by Steinar Sunde with support from the Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs. Sunde has been in charge of the work on anger management for parents and partners at the Family Counselling Centre in Molde since 2004.

